

# Training For Exploitation? Re-Writing the Hidden Curriculum

By Precarious Workers Brigade

We are a group of precarious workers in culture & education. We are activists, artists, gallery educators, curators and researchers. Since 2010 we have been organising around issues of free and precarious labour in the arts, education and the so-called creative industries. Through our work together, including the making of our Carrot Workers' Counter-Guide to Internships<sup>1</sup> and the organising of a People's Tribunal on Precarity,<sup>2</sup> it has become clear to us that our colleges and universities play a pivotal role in setting up and normalising free and precarious labour/life regimes.

In response to this realisation, we have started to work towards an alternative curriculum that could be used as a tool by educators and/or students. Educators in courses in the arts and cultural industries, gallery educators, vocational or professional development tutors, lecturers in charge of work placements and careers development officers might all find this resource helpful. We envisage this alternative curriculum to be used in relation to "vocational" education, internships, professional practice classes, preparation for work experience and other kinds of "work-related learning" embedded within or encouraged by educational practices. This is particularly pertinent in the current UK context where there are debates about the increasing emphasis on "employability" within education. While we feel that there is nothing wrong with work-based education, the emphasis on employability and increased links with industry can mean the subordination of education to corporate capitalism. While we are not suggesting that students forego work experience, we want to find ways of drawing attention to the issue of the pressures on students to undertake unpaid work as a requirement of academic accreditation and the way educators often encourage students to work for free as the initial step into paid employment. This is becoming increasingly pertinent both in terms of lack of employment for young graduates particularly during recession, but also as unpaid internships for graduates are becoming less acceptable. And while for example, the recent Arts Council's guidelines on internships are much less tolerant of unpaid internships, arts festivals like Documenta have a large number of unpaid "student assistants" alongside their paid interns, students are being encouraged to do unpaid internships during their summer breaks and more work placements are being embedded into higher education courses. There is a need therefore to develop resources that offer tools for critical discussion so that students will be able to develop an ethical code for their own labour/learning.

The position of art and design education as vocational pedagogy is very much based on the idea of art as a calling. This brings with it an idea of a higher status that is sometimes at odds with how society values artistic production. There are contradictions within this mode of thinking about art and the work of artists: the relationship with ideas of genius and the luxury goods of the art market on the one hand but also cities such as Berlin cashing in on the image of the poor but sexy artistic population on the other. In UNESCO's 1980 Status of the Artist report, an artist is defined as one who considers "artistic creation to be an essential part of their life ... and who asks to be recognized as an artist, whether or not they are bound by any relations of employment or association".<sup>3</sup> Through this idea of vocation, creative labour becomes something that is intrinsic to the artist's subjectivity and therefore not definable within the terms of wage relations. At the same time, the Bohemian sensibility of free spirited defiance and non-conformity encourages people to reject both traditional working class labour conditions and what might be seen as bourgeois materialism.<sup>4</sup> For cultural workers, more than just food and rent, work is bound up with desires around creativity, ego, authorship and individual performance. These also circulate within the pedagogies of art. In fact often, art school training puts the emphasis on the work coming first over and above everything else including individual subsistence. While this may provide some notion of value of the work produced it can also lead to training in what Andrew Ross called "sacrificial labour", creating a space open to

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1 Available for free download here: <http://carrotworkers.wordpress.com/counter-internship-guide/>

2 See Precarious Workers Brigade, 2011: Post-event reflections, published in DisMagazine 'Tools for Collective Action - Precarity: The Participatory People's Tribunal' and here: <http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/post/3999720634/precarity-the-peoples-tribunal>

3 See UNESCO World Congress on the Status of the Artist, 1980 <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001113/111305eo.pdf>

4 See Guy Standing, 2011. *The Precariat - the New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

self-exploitation.<sup>5</sup> Creative labour can seem to be an escape from the Protestant work ethic but may also end up mirroring it.<sup>6</sup> Work as play becoming more work and even overwork. The clichéd view that artists thrive on hardship also conflates the desire for more freedom and choice over work-life composition with a desire for precarious living conditions. It is therefore interesting to think about the role of the art school in producing subjectivities vulnerable to exploitation and the negative effects of precarity, as well as perhaps producing the “dark matter” as described by Gregory Sholette: the large numbers of “failed” artists who shore up the illusion of meritocracy in the art world.<sup>7</sup>

Within the context of art and design education, we are particularly interested in looking at its consequences more than its content in terms of its relationship to work and the economy. One of the things we want to do in developing resources is to address the disconnections between art practice, critical theory and professional development. It seems that often students are implicitly expected to turn off their critical/ political faculties when they enter a ‘professional practice’ seminar about copyright, self-marketing and fundraising. Students are often sold a shiny version of freelance work and are provided with tips on “how to make it in the creative industry” and “how to be a professional/employable” based on branding, entrepreneurship and the market, at odds with the critical theory and experimental practice that they may be also learning as part of an arts course. This kind of “Professional Practice” often provides a single model of how to “be professional” that is not to do with being critical and at the same time does not provide realistic information about the conditions of precarity, employment rights and real work/life in the creative and arts sectors. At the same time, students’ ‘critical studies’ and readings of Adorno et al, may be taught as abstract theory with little connection to their practices and how they might go about making a living. This disconnect is experienced by many as confusing and alienating. But perhaps worse, it replicates a general pattern in academia where politics is often limited to the production of ‘content’ without consequence, content that really ignores the structures and material conditions of its making.

We need to look for ways to work to re-connect the critical with the practical, ways to support other modes of doing culture, not just critique that abandons practice or practice that abandons critique. We need to encourage students not to turn their critical brains off when figuring out how to make a living, but instead to develop a critical practice.

A major concern for us is that there is always a danger that questioning and taking apart the ‘system’ can leave people paralysed and demoralised. It can seem as though the only choice is between competing and dropping out, neither of which are desired solutions. By sharing and speaking out about what may seem to be an individual dilemma or double-bind, a frame can be put round it making it visible as the social issue it really is. To make the framework visible in this way creates the space to step back and think about it differently. This can create the possibility for action rather than be caught in a fight or flight paralysis. Information can be shared and examples found of other ways of working, other spaces, economies and practices. Students can be encouraged to devise practical modes of mutual support before and after graduation and/or think about self-organised projects that might provide good alternatives. There are many ways that these issues can be brought out into the open and discussed properly. The important thing is to break the consensual silence surrounding them and figure out how to do culture differently.

<http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/>

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5 See Andrew Ross, *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and its Hidden Costs*, Philadelphia PA: Temple 2003  
Andrew Ross, ‘The Mental Labour Problem’, *Social Text* 63, Vol. 18, number 2, 2000.

6 See Kathi Weeks, 2011. *The Problem with Work*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

7 See Gregory Sholette, 2009. *Dark Matter: Art, Politics and the age of the enterprise culture*. London: Pluto Press.